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Paper:

Davies, E. & Oakley, S. (2015). A new way to learn? Bite-sized Twitter training at Swansea University. *ALISS Quarterly, 10*(4), 21-24.

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A new way to learn? Bite-sized Twitter training at Swansea University

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Towards the end of 2014 we began to think about how to reach staff and postgraduate researchers who cannot attend our timetabled training sessions and to investigate ways to deliver training to a wider audience. Providing information skills sessions on topics such as library inductions, literature searching and referencing has long been part of the librarian's role at Swansea University. We are fortunate to be embedded and compulsory in a large number of undergraduate/taught postgraduate courses. These sessions are timetabled either in PC labs or lecture theatres for 1-2 hours. In contrast, postgraduate research student and staff sessions are attended on a voluntary basis. We have a year-long programme of sessions (http://www.swansea.ac.uk/iss/isstraining/) covering topics such as "Effective database searching", "Getting published" and "Finding funding". In the academic year 2013-14 the average attendance for each session was 10 participants.

"Twitter for Beginners" was one of the most popular staff sessions in 2014 and was repeated three times due to demand. However it is difficult to convey the usefulness and sense of community of Twitter in an hour in a classroom. We have had a presence on Twitter for several years, both as an organisation and as individuals. We often get queries from staff on social media tools therefore we were very interested to read about Helen Webster's experiences of running online training using the medium of Twitter and blogs. Helen is a Learning Developer at Newcastle University and pioneered the "Ten days of Twitter" course in 2013. The course is run over ten days and each day participants are given a small task to achieve, ranging from the basics on day 1 - setting up an account - to more advanced features on day 10 - scheduling, deleting and archiving tweets. The original course materials are available on the website https://10daysoftwitter.wordpress.com.

Following Twitter conventions, the iterations of the course are identified by their hashtags. Originally Helen ran 2 courses; #LD10dot aimed at Learning Developers and #STEM10DoT aimed at Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics researchers (Webster, 2014). The course is available via Creative Commons licence enabling anyone to use the original and adapt it to suit their needs. It has already been adapted and replicated at several institutions including Regents University, London (#RUL10DoT), Anglia Ruskin University (#ARU10DoT), University of Sussex (#10DOTTEL), University College Dublin (#UCD10dot), York St John University (#YSJ10DOT), Cambridge University (#CAMdot) and University of Toronto (#UofT10DoT).

Preparation for the course

Preparation of the course took approximately 1 week (alongside existing workloads) and, as Rowell (2014) states, it worked well having a small team share the effort of preparing material and running the course. Our team for the course was two named facilitators plus two assistants to respond and tweet. We decided to use Wordpress as our blogging platform (https://su10dot.wordpress.com/) as it is easy to use and we were familiar with it. The two main facilitators repurposed the original materials, adapting them for our target audience at Swansea University (e.g. including Swansea University Twitter accounts and examples) and checking for any content that needed updating (e.g. free web tools that no longer existed). Links were checked and the blog posts scheduled for the ten days.

We were fortunate to have the support of experienced academic tweeters on campus who encouraged colleagues to join in. We also developed bilingual promotional materials which were distributed via all staff email, flyers, posters, social media and an internal blog. Once promotion started, the number of registrations on the blog site was very encouraging; in the 2 weeks leading up to the start of the course we had 285 people view our blog and we had 151 people signed-up at the start. From the statistics available to us there were 104 Swansea University staff who signed up and 4 Swansea University students; the remainder were users from other institutions and non-affiliated email addresses.

Running the course

The course ran for 2 consecutive weeks commencing on the 19th January 2015 and finishing on the 30th January 2015. We encouraged people to use the Wordpress "Email Subscription" option to sign up so that they would get an email with the day's blog post encouraging them to complete that day's task. We decided to run the course Monday-Friday each week rather than a continuous 10 days as some other "10 Days of Twitter" courses have done (Rowell, 2014). We felt participants would be less willing to participate at weekends. Some courses create a separate course account on Twitter (e.g. @ARU10dot, @RUL10dot and as described by Fisher, Exley and Ciobanu (2014)) but we decided using our personal accounts would foster cross-campus networking and give participants a clearer sense of who they were interacting with.

During the course of the 2 weeks we had a total of 205 people view the blog posts. On day 2 of the course we asked participants to tweet using the phrase "Joining in #SU10DoT with @rscsam and @benfelen".The 38 active participants using this phrase and/or the course hashtag #SU10DoT were then added to a Twitter list. The first week and especially the first day had a lot of activity and interaction. Day 1 saw a lot of technical questions sent to us via the blog's comments section, Twitter and email. The advantage of training using this format is that participants were free to access the material when they wanted - this meant questions could come at any time of night or day. Working in a team allowed us to respond quickly; as experienced and enthusiastic social media users we did not find the extra work onerous to check our accounts and monitor the hashtag. We used Hootsuite to create alerts so that we would be notified when participants were using the hashtag. As the daily blog posts were scheduled to be sent early in the morning the main interactions during the course were in the mornings however we did have interactions in the evenings and afternoons as well.

As Rowell (2014) also experienced there was a lull in the course at the halfway point, perhaps due to the break at the weekend. We tried to counteract this by organising a tweetup for participants in one of the campus coffee shops for the second week. We had 9 people attend and it was rewarding to meet participants face-to-face and hear their thoughts on the course.

Feedback

As expected, numbers of participants dwindled between the start and end. An evaluation form was sent the week after the course finished and we had 19 responses. 14 people completed the course with 5 others planning to complete the course, a 12.5% completion rate. This seemed low but to give a comparable context, this equates to double that for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) which are at 6.5% (Jordan, 2014).

The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive. We asked 4 basic questions in the evaluation form; firstly why they chose to sign up to the course. Although the answers varied, the main responses were split into three areas: those who had never used Twitter before and wanted to know how it worked, those who had limited knowledge (i.e. had an account but never really used it) and those who were confident but wanted to fill in gaps in their knowledge of Twitter or reflect on their practice. We had anticipated that the course would mainly attract Twitter novices but this was not the case.

Participants were also asked if they had completed the course. Of the participants who had not completed 80% stated work or time pressures, however they were planning on completing the course in their own time. The remaining 20% stated they were already familiar with some of the content. When asked if they had enjoyed the course 100% of responses gave us positive feedback; the course being very supportive and friendly, useful to have daily small bites and useful to have help and support directly available.

It was important to us to find out whether this online learning format would appeal to participants with another topic area. 74% of respondents stated they would like to see further training provided in this format, some emphasising the value of having training without leaving their offices. Suggestions for further online training in this format were LinkedIn, Endnote (referencing tool) and Blackboard (Virtual Learning Environment).

Conclusion

It was very encouraging to have such positive feedback and we will definitely run this course again. The feedback showed that 100% of participants indicated they would like to continue to use Twitter in either a personal or a professional capacity after the course. Based on our experience, and reading about other "10 Days of Twitter" courses, there are a number of changes we would consider making in future versions. Rowell (2014) and Vincent (2015) both introduced an element of gamification to their courses. Vincent (2015) describes his use of [the app Rise](#) to introduce a successful competition element to his course which also allowed them to "measure meaningful engagement". This would help with the lull which inevitably happened in the break between both working weeks. 100% of the participants who completed the evaluation were Swansea University staff members so next time we would target more advertising at postgraduate research students. We are also investigating this teaching model for other topics, shortening the course to 5 days for the working week. The course has raised the library's profile and encouraged future collaboration - shortly after, we were involved in a successful bid for funding for an online course to bridge the transition gap for new Psychology students to prepare them for life at University.

The material used for the Swansea University "10 days of Twitter" course can be accessed at https://su10dot.wordpress.com/ and the storify archive can be accessed at https://storify.com/rscsam/10-days-of-twitter-at-swansea-university

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